DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 033 792 RC 003 797

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TITLE Me. From the Children of the Deep South Ccmes a Cry for Help that Cannct be Ignored.
INSTITUTION Office cf Eccncmic Opportunity, Washington, D.C. Volunteers in Service to America.
Pub Date Jun 69
Note 41p.

EDRS Price EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$2.15
Descriptcrs *Disadvantaged Youth, Educaticnal Opportunities, Educaticnal Retardation, *Family Role, Federal Aid, Hygiene, Individual Development, *Negrc Youth, *Personal Adjustment, Personality Development, Rural Areas, *Schcol Segregation, Social Development, Teaching Ccnditicns, Tutoring

Abstract

The plight of many children cf the Deep South, their personal and social prcblems, is revealed through the experiences cf a VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) volunteer. The volunteer spent one academic year, 1966-67, in the VISTA program as a schccl tutor and then returned cn her cwn in the summer of 1968 to cffer additional educational services. During these twc periods time was spent with or Negrc girl, Hattie Mae. Various sources cf data provide the biographical and background information of the child. Anecdotal records and drawings are a part cf this report. This information is ccmpared and analyzed for the sccial, educaticnal, and personal growth of the student. The document concludes with a brief resume of the events and feelings experienced by the Negro child as she spent one week in the tutor's home in Wisconsin. (DB)

ED033792

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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From the children of the Deep South comes a cry for help that cannot be ignored.

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Published by
Volunteers In Service To America
Office of Economic Opportunity
Washington, D.C. 20506

ED033792

Me

BY HATTIE MAE AND LEA HEINE

PREFACE

ME is a cry for help.

It is a factual story about a small black child living in the South. By means of "social promotion" she is now in 5th grade but performs on a 2nd grade level. This is also an indictment against the indifference on the part of a larger segment of American society.

In theory to the uninitiated the term "Freedom of Choice" School sounded so reasonable: a free choice to send a child to whatever school is deemed best suited to his needs. In fact, however, it is nothing of the kind. For a black parent to send his children to a white school is often a decision accompanied by fear and uncertainty—fear of losing his job should "The Man" find out about it and uncertainty as to the child's chances of success in the new environment. He has no illusions that his children will find sympathetic and compassionate teachers in a white school and life is hard enough without seeking out more problems.

There are other fears.

I asked a father living with his large family in a rural area at the side of a dirt road why he had not sent his children to the white school. At first he was evasive. "They can make up their own minds, I'm not going to tell them what school they should go to." But he looked away when he said it and we both knew that he was ashamed to admit his fears in front of me, a white woman. A strong, proud man, he had worked his own farm all of his life and was a leader in this all-Negro community. He and his neighbors had pooled their money and built a cement-block community center. Shortly after it was finished they came to hold a meeting and found a wreath hanging on the doorknob. Two weeks later the center was burned down. "It's easy to say, 'send your children to the white school.' Here I am, sitting not twenty feet off the road. Anyone can ride by and throw a bomb at my house."

He had said it at last and we both felt relieved and now more at ease. "Isn't it ridiculous," he continued. "Here I am with two sons in the Service. One is in the hospital right now, he was injured you know and the other one is still fighting. And both in Vietnam. Yet I, here at home, have to be afraid to send the young ones to a white school. Anyway, I'd rather have them go on to the colored school. A change now might be too hard for them; they're used to it now."

And so the children continued to make the long twenty mile roundtrip to town each day, passing the white school on the way no more than four miles from their home.

Others tried and found the standards in the white school much higher and, fearing failure, returned their children to the old and familiar school, segregated and so unequal. No matter what their elected representatives in Washington may claim, the black parents and their children know that there is no Freedom for them and that they have no Choice.

What then is offered them? As a VISTA Volunteer I tutored in a totally segregated school during the academic year of 1966-67. The building was constructed in 1955, immediately after the Supreme Court decision. It was of good contemporary design, made of red brick and accommodated five hundred children. If at any time funds had been allocated for the upkeep of the school it could not be noticed; normal wear and tear by the youngsters eventually caused the building to deteriorate. By 1966 all playground equipment, save a slide, were gone.

Only the empty steel poles of a merry-go-round and a set of swings gave witness of their previous existence. There never had been any landscaping around the building and each rainy day brought mud oozing into the doorways. The ballfield with its many potholes was unfit for running; besides it was located next to the faculty's parking lot and could not be used until after school and then only by those children who happened to live in the vicinity.

Unbelievable as it may seem, there was no private office for the principal. His secretary occupied the only office, taking up most of the space with a large desk, her typewriter and two file cabinets. The principal sat between two doors, facing a wall at a table on which he carried out all of his duties while people walked past him to consult with his secretary or to get to the sick room used by a schoolnurse who came when she was called. The lounge for teachers — used by both sexes — was a tiny room that held a sagging couch, one side table and a sink. Only boiling hot water came from the faucet. The teachers brought their own soap. The children had no running water in the toilet areas for handwashing. Some rooms had a sink and some teachers again brought soap. Considering that for many children this was the only opportunity to use running water and have a chance to learn something of the rudiments of personal hygiene, the shortsightedness of the local school officials seems all the more incomprehensible. One by one windows were broken and children had to sit in class with their coats on (those who had any) while the rain and snow came through the open holes.

One room stood out above all the others. With funds from Title I a large and cheerful library had been furnished and its shelves stacked with an excellent selection of books. Too bad, though understandable, that no one below fourth grade could go there to take out a book or even to look at one. The primary reason for this rule was that most of the children lived under such crowded conditions that they could not promise to keep track of a book and bring it back safely.

A Cafetorium used to feed the children and to hold assembly as well as music classes, had no screendoor so that flies swarmed in through the broken windows at lunchtime. Each day six boys were called from their classroom at 10:30 to set up the chairs for lunch and then remained later to put them up again in order that the janitor could clean the room. This in itself might not seem important; however, considering the rest of the

daily schedule one cannot help but wonder exactly how much time they did spend in their classrooms. A sampling of an average day might prove to be enlightening. It started when the children had to be at the side of the road by 7 o'clock to wait for the bus, arriving at the school by 8:30. After prayer and announcements out of the way it was then almost 9 o'clock before the day began in earnest. Lunch was served at 11 o'clock with the younger children, grades one through three, going first. Then they returned to their room for quiet study only to be released again at 12 for recess. By 12:45 afternoon classes resumed and at 2:30 the busses arrived to take the children on their long trek home. Having been gone from home as much as nine hours, they had spent hardly more than half of this time at their desks. This then was a typical segregated school, worse than some, better than most.

For our tutoring sessions we sat in a windowless storage closet, no heat and not much room, but big enough for a card table, one child and myself.

Her name, she said, was Hattie Mae and she was eleven years old. She was so fragile and tiny that, had she said she was six, I would have believed it. It was October and there were cold mornings when she dressed only in a short, thin dress. I could see the outline of her fine-boned body and she shivered as I lifted her on my lap and wrapped my sweater around her bare legs and feet. When I asked her why she hadn't dressed warmer she told me the obvious: "I haven't got anything else."

When I came back the next year she again wore what seemed to be the same, nondescript gray dress and again she had no shoes. But now I asked no more questions.

Nothing had changed since I left except that Mother was expecting her ninth child. None of the local poverty programs had touched her life nor that of several hundred other children in Jacob's Hollow. A local ruling demanding racial balance in the Headstart program left most of the black children out. Only when a white child

could be persuaded to attend would a black one become eligible. At best, the arrangement was better than nothing at all.

After completing my VISTA service, I decided to return on my own during the summer of 1968. Having no official standing, there was no school or community center available to me and I pitched a tent in the woods. Soon the word got around that Miss Imy was back. Hattie came first, to be followed soon by her sisters and a friend. Within a week I had a full class of fifteen children. Before the summer was over twenty-five of them greeted me each morning as soon as I drove through the woods to our spot under the tall, loblolly pines.

We had a daily story hour, coloring books galore and two sturdy ropes tied to a limb high above ground. While I tutored one child, the rest would busy themselves with colors or take their turn swinging from the ropes. About midway through the morning we had milk, graham crackers and raisins. For most of them this was the only food until evening since "Mama don't cook but one meal a day."

As during my previous visit, I asked Hattie to do a book for me and so it happened that one quiet Saturday morning we met near the tent with the sun streaming down on us between the pines. Nothing interrupted us but the occasional song of a mocking bird. She went ahead with her drawings, hesitating only for a moment between pictures to ask for help with some of the spelling. She finished in less than an hour.

When I had a chance to compare the pictures done in 1966 with those of 1968 I was shocked with what I saw. For before me unfolded the tragic story of total neglect by her community. A classic in deprivation and misery forced upon one child, one of many thousands. I decided that she should speak for them all in her own way and perhaps, by some miracle, they might be heard.

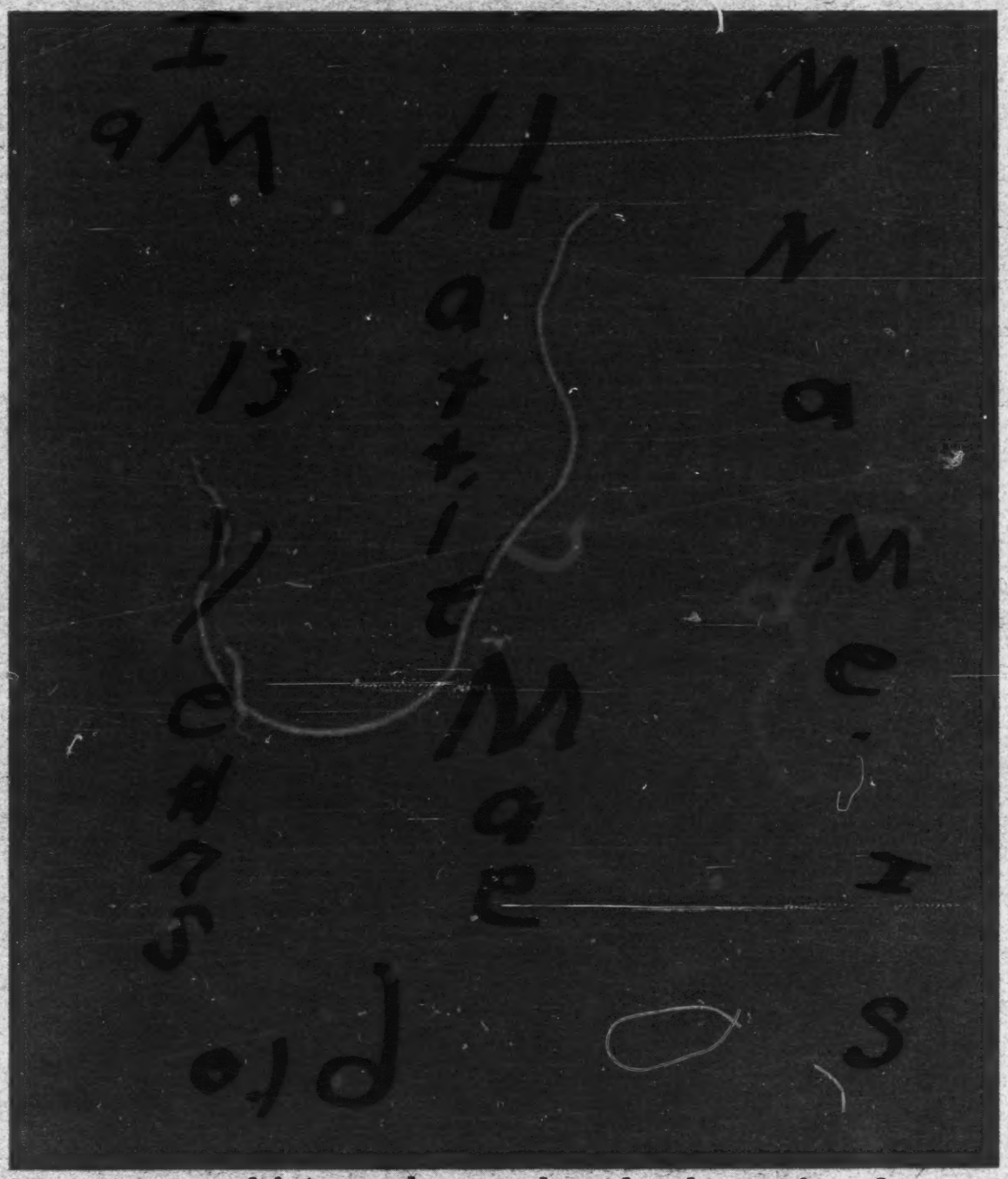
Lea Heine
Madison, Wisconsin
January, 1969

MY NAME IS HATTIE MAE

"What should I draw?"
"Well, how about yourself? Tell me about yourself. Who are you, how old are you?" "Okay."

An ordinary white pad, 8½ x 11, lay before her. It confused her. She didn't know which way to write and when I tried to help by telling her to work from left to right she placed her right arm across the top of the page and with hand curved downward she produced the first page.

Later on, in trying to explain her bewilderment to myself, I realized that in her seven years at school she had never had the money to buy a notebook or a writing pad. When she needed paper she had to beg from friends and teachers. Sometimes this meant getting an unlined piece of paper or a threeholed lined sheet or one from the practice pads used in southern schools, 11¾ inches long and 7 inches high. Never had there been continuity in so basic a tool as a writing pad.



Now, at age thirteen she was hopelessly confused.

MY HOUSE

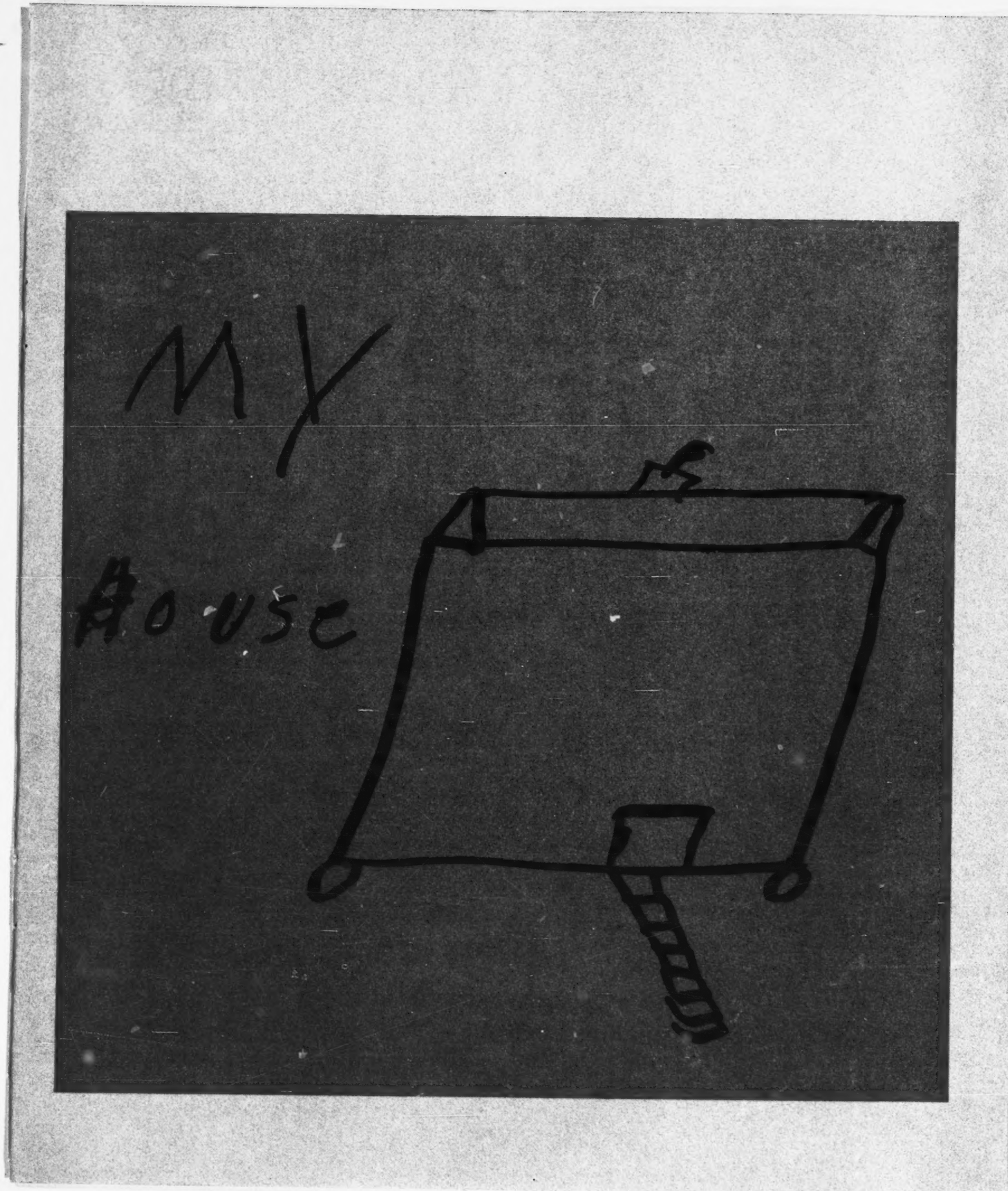
How could anyone call it a house! A two-room shack that had never seen paint, it sat precariously on four piles of rock, four feet above ground. Electric wires, water and sewage fixtures hung from its underside fully exposed and visible from the street. This together with an unbelievable collection of discarded furniture, broken toys, a pile of wood and rubbish furnished a convenient hiding place for rats, mangy stray dogs and an occasional snake.

"How many steps—eight—is it?"
"I think you're right." "Okay."

There were no windows toward the front. The door was kept shut by hooking two bent nails together, one over the other. A woodstove used for heating and cooking, a broken armchair and an old TV set – a present from Jamie's boss – made up the furniture of this, the living room.

The kitchen too held a large bed, no chairs, no dishes other than a frying pan and a coffee pot. Obviously meals were eaten ketch as ketch can, directly from the pan. There was no table for the family to sit around and eat together. The sink was used for storing groceries since the water had been turned off by the city over four years ago.

This was "My House" and Home to eleven people.


MY
House

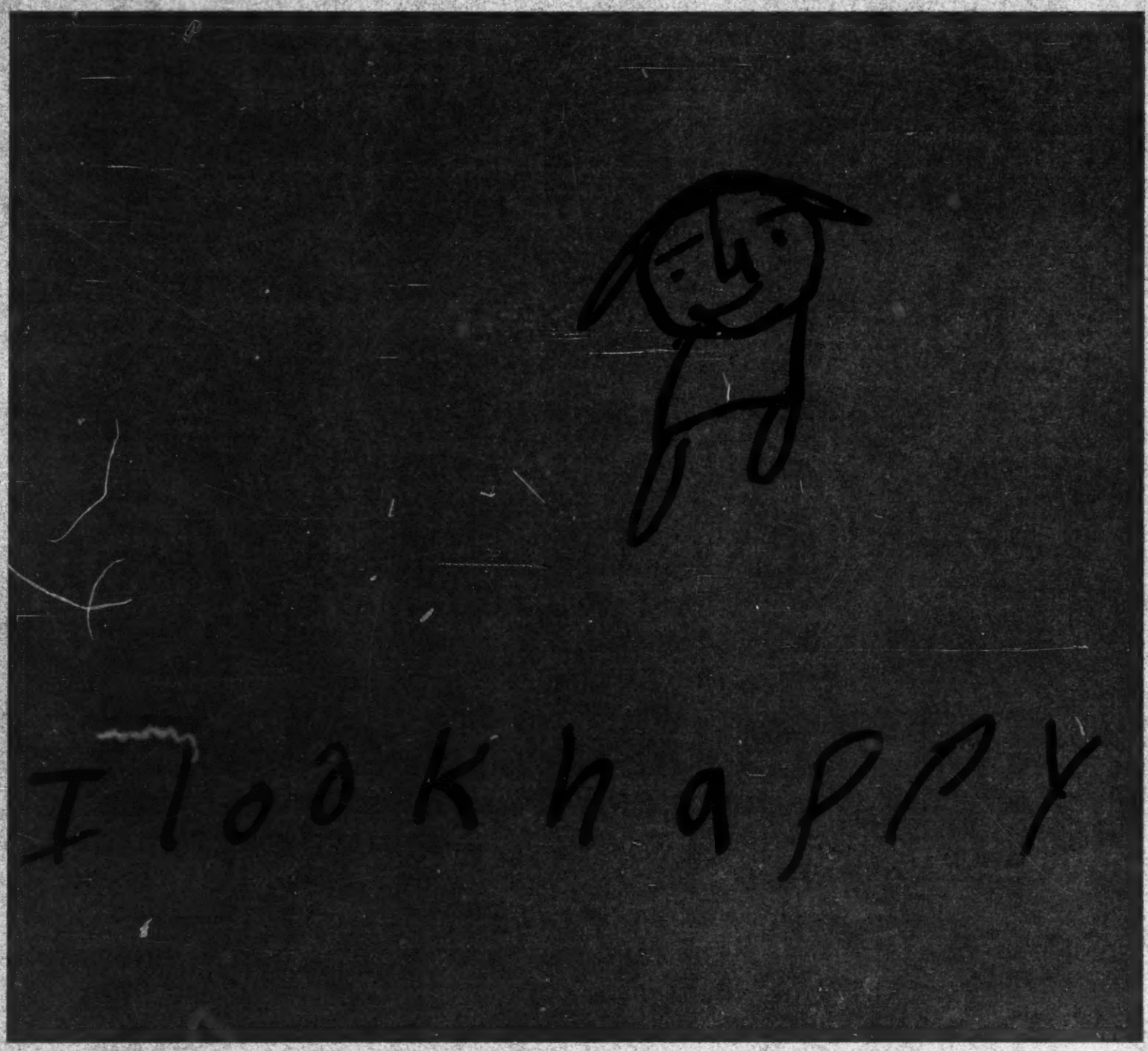
I SLEEP HERE

Inside, a large bedstead held a filthy, sagging mattress usually occupied by three babies staring silently into the blackness around them.

I sleep here

I LOOK HAPPY

Why?
Perhaps
it was the day;
warm and unhurried
or the silence of the woods around us
and the gentle song
of the birds above.
It was enough – she was happy.


I look happy

MY MOMMA

Early in 1966 Mama had her seventh child and both of them nearly died during delivery. Papa's boss offered to pay the large hospital bill and then he took out $20.00 each week from the paycheck. Papa earned $50.00 per week.

Then Mama started to go to the city sponsored family-planning clinic but the kids ate the pills and in March of 1967 she was expecting again. To Hattie, her mother was someone to be tolerated, to be waited on as one does the queen bee. Automatically and without complaining she simply took on the job of minding and raising each baby as it came along.

2 YEARS LATER

MY POPPA

1968 – and another baby on the way and Hattie decided that in this picture her mother should be wearing earrings. As in other pictures to follow she began now to fabricate. Life, as it really was, was becoming unbearable. Thus, the earrings.

Jamie was as good a father as he knew how to be. He worked steady and brought home all of his earnings. He rose early and cooked the grits each morning. He drank only on weekends, beginning with Friday night. Then he'd sit quietly in a corner in front of the TV.

Jamie was not really Hattie's father, her real one "done gone up the river, and ain't never comin' back." But he liked Hattie and she respected him. When I asked about him she told me that he had been sick. "Truth is," piped up her younger and less compassionate sister, "he was drunk."

"He not drunk Miss' Imy," Hattie defended the family's honor, "He jest sick."

But when she drew his picture, both in 1966 and again in 1968, there were no arms for Jamie.

2 YEARS LATER

MY

POPPA

MY SISTERS AND BROTHERS

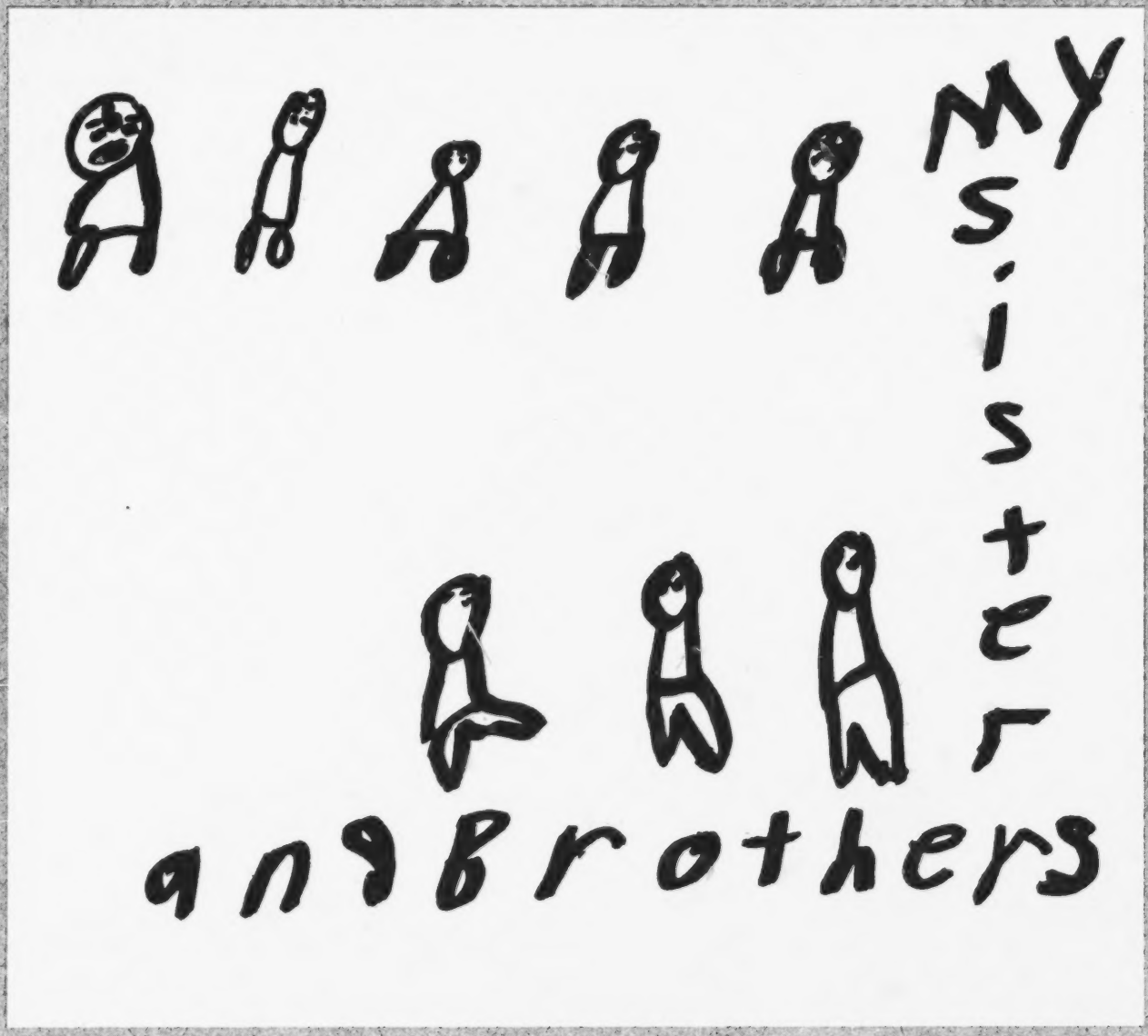
At one time
they fairly bounced across the page.
Some laughed and all had arms.
Gay little people with dancing feet.

Now, nearly two years later and two more added, they had all become just so many symbols except: "the baby, he really the littlest, but I'm going to make him the biggest."

Shown as the first one of the five girls the baby is again her responsibility. Hers to carry around on her fragile hips and the only one to have a mouth.

On all the rest, lips, noses and arms have disappeared.

2 YEARS LATER



I TAKE A BATH

Bathing had been a time
for all the kids
to gather in the kitchen around the washtub,
all taking their turn
jumping in and out
of the warm and sudsy water
with Mama supervising the scrubbing.

In 1968 and now
nearly thirteen years old,
one bathes alone.

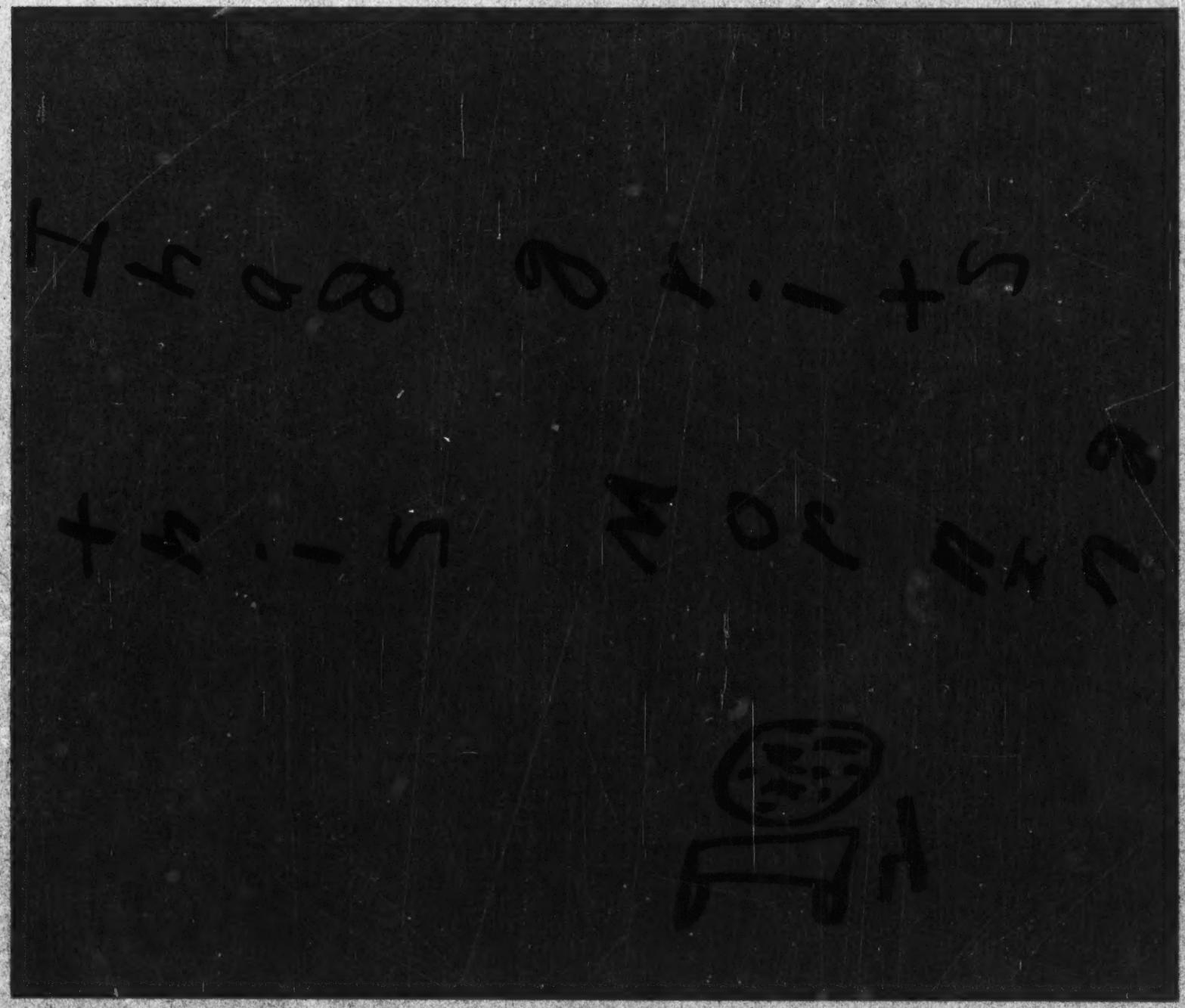
2 YEARS LATER

I HAD GRITS THIS MORNING

As a matter of fact she never ate breakfast and while Jamie did cook them each morning she confided to me "I hate grits" and so there was nothing else all day until evening when mother cooked that one meal.

For all of her thirteen years her diet had consisted mainly of cold bisquits dipped in grease, an occasional hotdog on payday and when she got hold of a quarter, a bottle of pop and potato chips. If and when she was able to get away from the babies and could go to school she participated in the school's lunch program. During the summer she found wild plums and berries in the woods.

At this writing she is unable to eat a balanced meal and rich milk nauseates her.

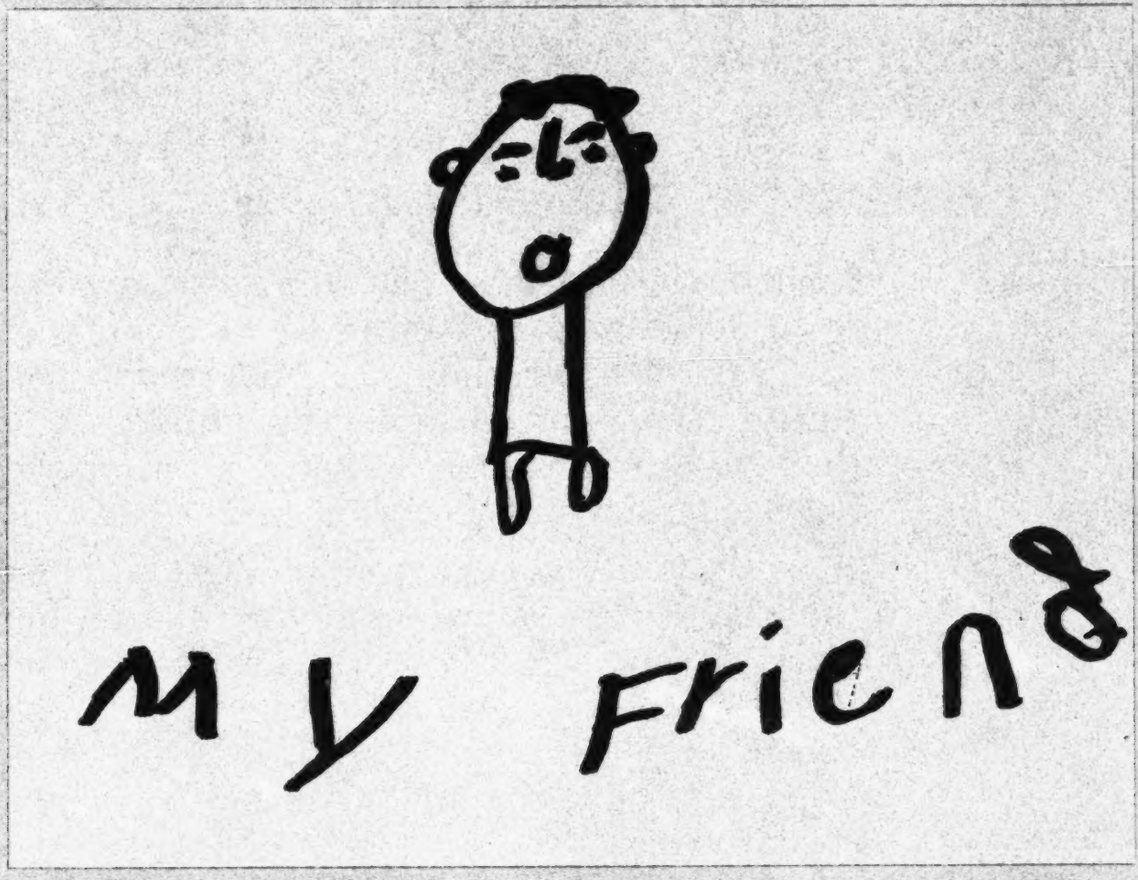


MY FRIEND

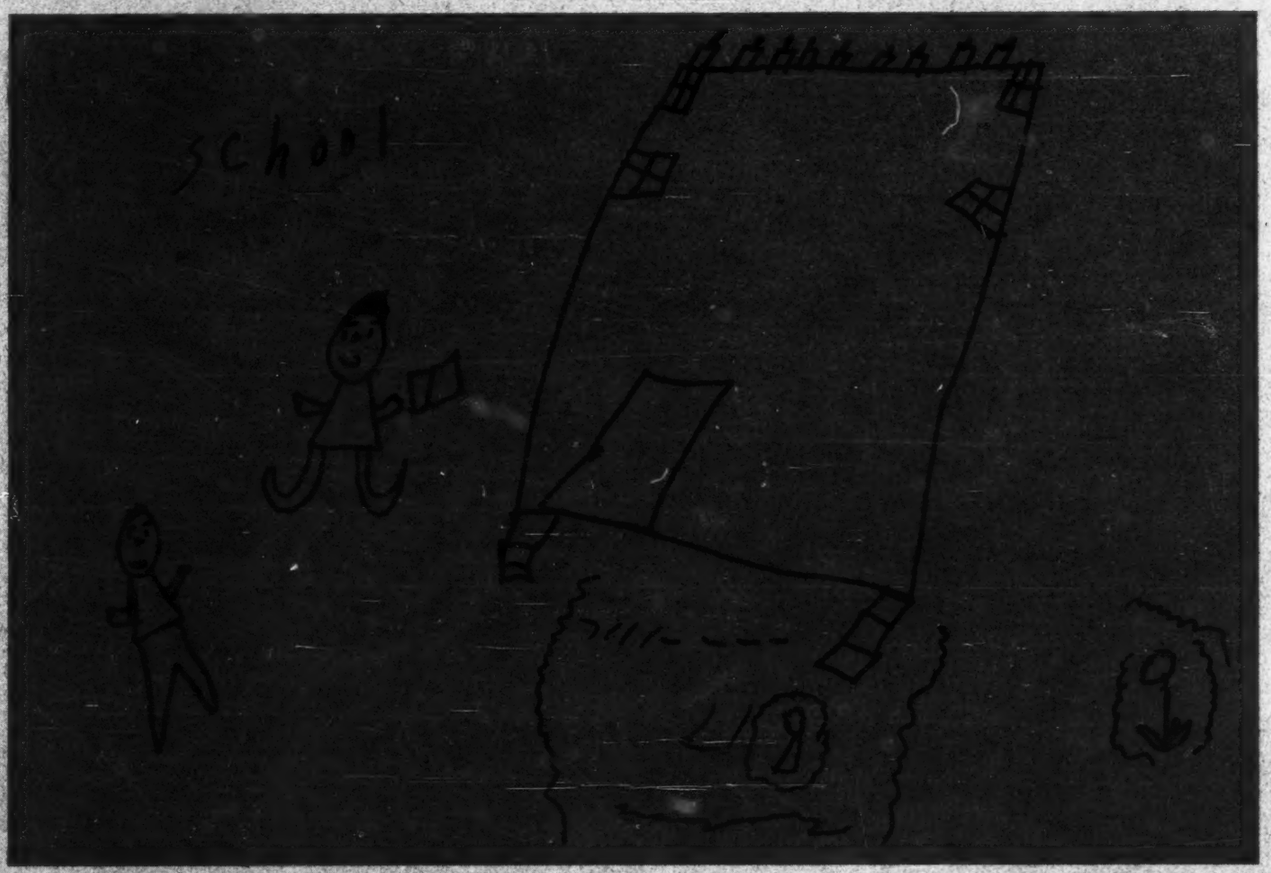
Friends are important people
to little girls
and once there was
Tracy
who was very special.
She shared and Hattie could go to her house
and get away from the chores and
noise of her own family.
Tracy walked to school with her
and gave her paper
and let her sneak under
her raincoat—
but Tracy moved.

Now, a friend is anybody
and nobody in particular
and she no longer cares
if she has one or not.

2 YEARS LATER



SCHOOL



School was still fun in 1966 and she was eager to go. Sometimes she found a flower on the way and gave it to Teacher who said "thank you Hattie Mae, that was very thoughtful" and then she'd put it in a coke bottle on her desk. She had liked her teacher then.

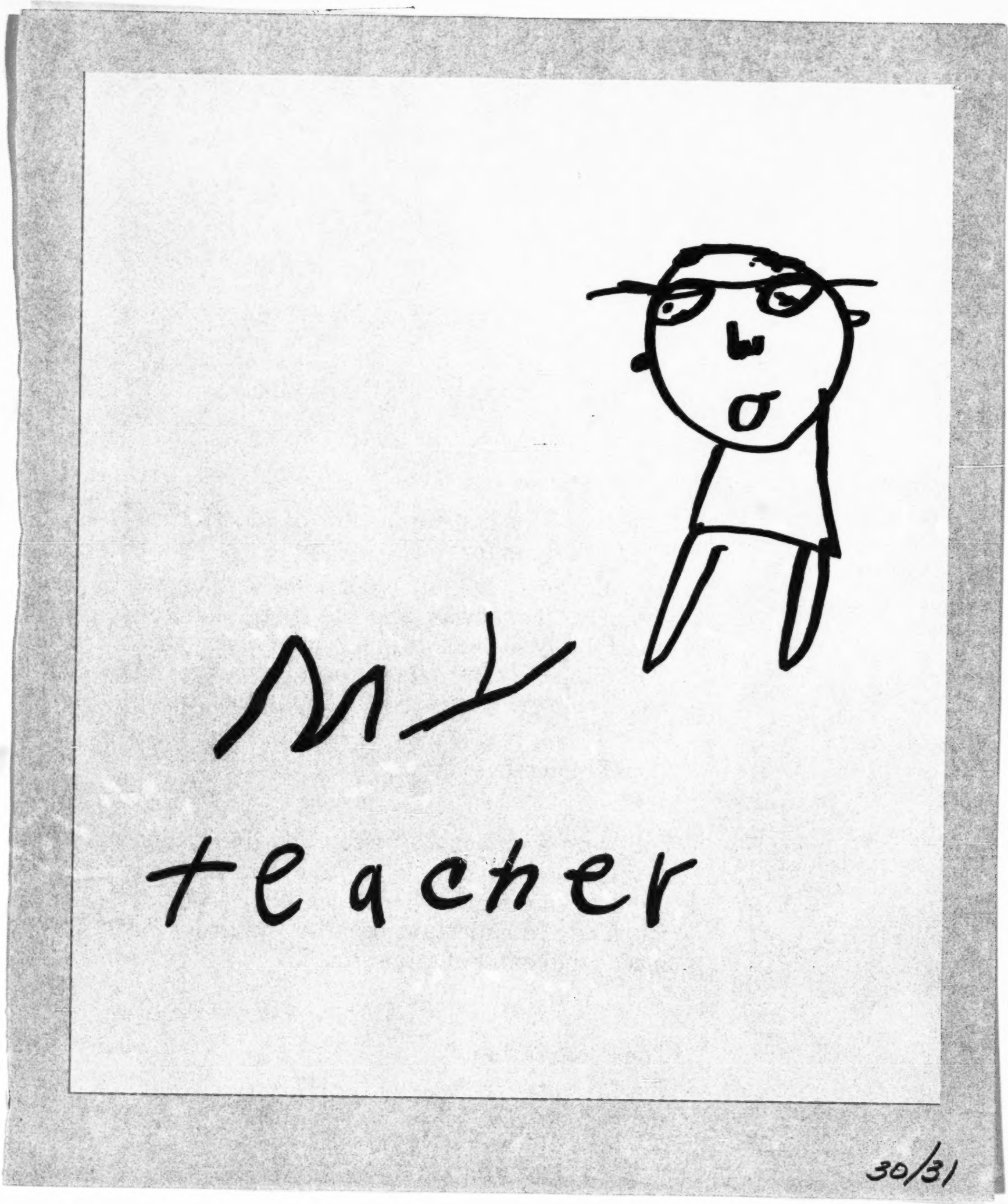
Her homeroom had many windows broken and the wind and snow came through and on top of Hattie and Teacher moved her toward the middle of the room, where it was warmer. She herself had also caught cold, but she came every day as more and more of her pupils stayed away.

My schoolroom

2 YEARS LATER

By 1968 more windows were gone and teachers throughout the school had put cardboard and construction paper over the gaping holes.

Hattie had gone on to a different room although she knew all too well that she hadn't really learned enough to be promoted. Now 13 years old she attended fifth grade and had become painfully aware of her inadequacies. School had become a chamber of stark horror.


teacher

I LIKE TO BE PATSY

"What do you like to do best of all, Hattie? What's real fun for you?"

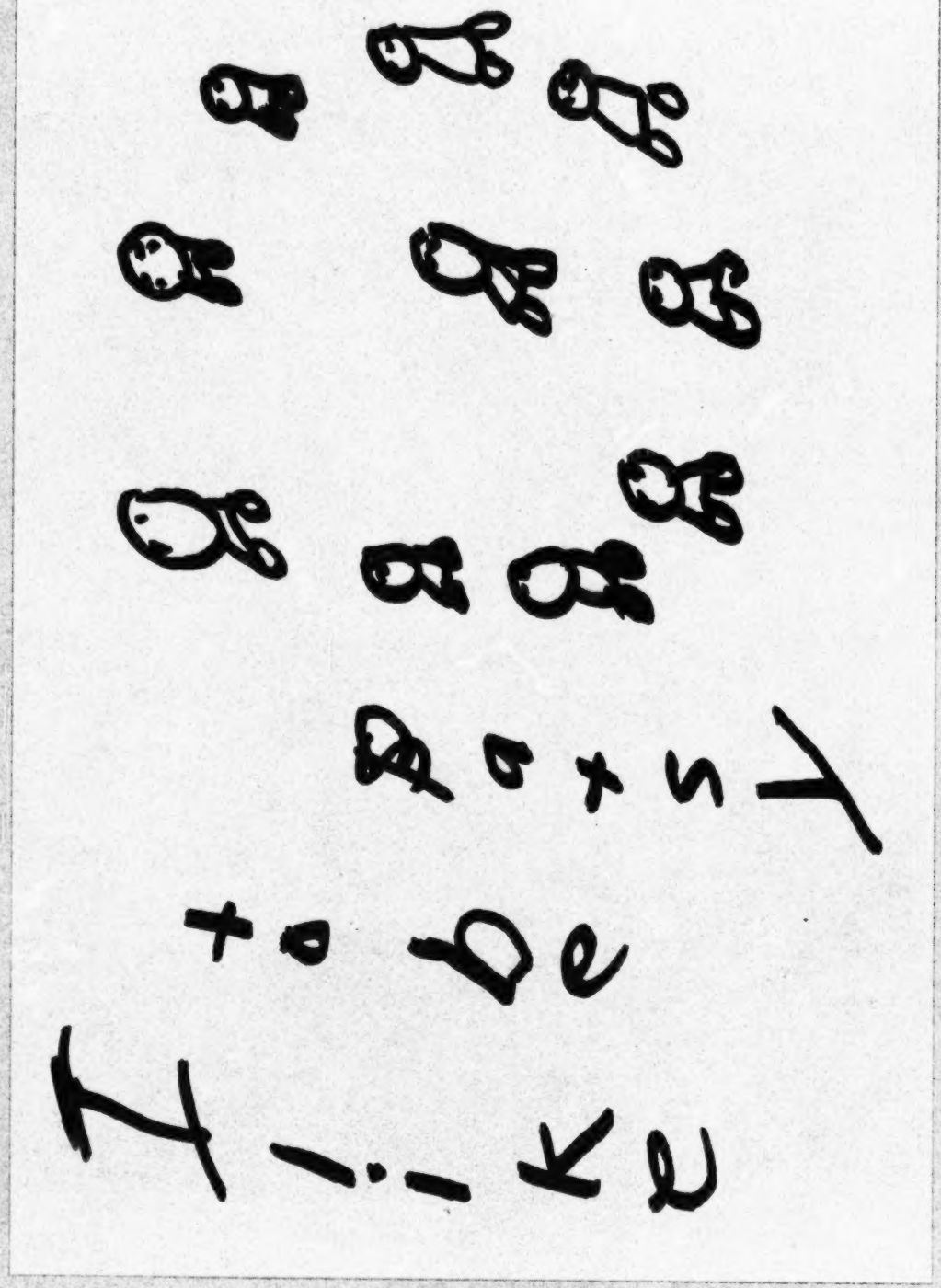
She shrugged her shoulders, looked at me seriously, then away and on up to the tree tops. Finally she took the pen out of her mouth. "I like to be Patsy. When I go to a party, you know, there's games, see? And I like to be Patsy."

Then I remembered.

You form a circle, play Drop the Hanky and if you lose, you are Patsy and you have to stand in the circle. Then, everybody looks at you. You are important because you are – for once – the center of attention.

The Fool? Perhaps.

But for a little while – you are IT.



THIS IS WHAT I WANT FOR MY BIRTHDAY

When you're eleven
you still wish for the possible —
a candy cane.

And when you're thirteen,
you live on dreams.

I want

a bike

I want to be a Doctor

IMY

4 24.

Hattie

POSTSCRIPT

At the end of the summer she came home to Wisconsin with me. She loved the long trip and turned out to be a remarkably good travelling companion. She seemed to enjoy anything and everything at the big Milwaukee Zoo and most of all a ride on a miniature train there. At a dress-up party she danced to the tune of the Nut-cracker Suite and outshone all others in her long, satin gown. To the applause of the adults, she took a series of graceful bows with much aplomb and elegance.

She hated milk, eggs and all the good food we had hoped would help to put a little much needed weight on her. She was terrified at being left alone in a room even for a minute and could not go to sleep in a bed by herself. Having slept with at least four other children on a mattress without sheets or pillows, she could not bear the white, cold vastness of an ordinary bed. A sleeping bag was made up for her on a narrow couch and thus, securely tucked in on all sides, she was able to relax and sleep.

After a week of excitement and fun she was ready to go home and looked forward to telling her family and friends of her many adventures. Her eyes shone in anticipation when I kissed her goodby at the airport.

"Miss' Imy, when I git back, everybody goin' come callin' on me"

she laughed, waved at us — and was gone.

Hattie Mae

Lea Heine

*U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1969 O - 353-039

OEO PAMPHLET 4100-7
JUNE 1969
DISTRIBUTION: S